

## **Culture and humor in ads:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Humor is a recurrent tool in effective advertising campaigns from mid-twentieth century in numerous countries (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). The proportion of international advertisements using humorous appeals shows a tendency of growth from year to year and reached up to 56 % in advertising campaigns in 2018. Considering the huge and growing global advertising spending which represented US\$589.5 billion in 2018 (Global Carat), it appears essential to understand the stimulus of humor in ads tendency with a cross cultural comparison.

The peculiarity of humor in advertising is that it targets a very heterogeneous audience simultaneously on the local and national even international scale. While humor is universally practiced, its use in advertising may require adaptation when communicating in different cultural contexts (Alden et al 1993) and the standardization of its usage across national borders (Weinberger & Spotts 1989, Cheng & Duo, 2003, Eisend 2009) is still question of debate. The objective of this research is to understand the cultural differences in terms of humor in ads, the influence of culture in the consumer perception and behavior aiming at analyzing if a standardized humorous ad could be possible.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Humor in ads, can be virtuous for the consumer and for the advertiser. While humor is universal its effects can vary in diverse markets (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Cultural values (Schwarz et al., 2015) can influence the evaluation, the perception of humor but also the preferences on the type of humor used in each market (Cifuentes & Sánchez, 2005). Advertising can strongly be based on the culture of the country (unicultural dimension

Ozdemir and Hewett, 2010), on tradition and on a specific mode of communication (Newman 2004; Tungate, 2007).

It can register strongly in this context which will impact the understanding and perception of the message it wants to convey and influence consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. (Palmatier et al., 2006). Considering this, some campaigns would be totally impossible to export (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder and Iacobucci 2001) while others might require some adaptation to suit different cultural contexts (Alden et al 1993).

Over the last 50 years, the question of standardization and adaptation of advertising campaigns on the international scale has been the subject of extensive research (Schmid & Kotulla, 2011). However, reviews of existing literature show serious doubt on the results of the previous research (Birnik & Bowman, 2007). In the case of humorous ads, companies are advised to “standardize” in their international communication (Alden et al., 1993) and at the same time to “adapt” their strategies even locally on their national markets (Rutigliano, 1986).

The objective of this research cross-cultural study is to explore humor in ads' variations across cultures in, France, US and China, understand the role of culture in the process of persuasive communication and redefine the question of standardization of humorous advertising.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

Relatively few comparative studies exist on the relationship between advertising and humor on the international scale. In this study, we wondered about: The impact of Culture on Advertising Effectiveness. Looking at the state-of-the-art of the literature on humor in advertising in the world, we would like to propose a complementary research question on

the role of culture in the persuasive communication process on the effectiveness of international advertisements using the humorous message. North America is the largest regional ad market, followed closely by Asia Pacific and Western Europe (GroupM). Referring to the cultural dimension by Hofstede (2011), France, US, and China seem to be interesting to study regarding the differences and similitudes in their societies. In our conceptual model, we wanted to emphasize the role of culture in the acceptance and appreciation of humorous advertising. We also wanted to highlight its impact on the attitude towards advertising, the attitude towards the brand, as well as the intention of purchase (Schwarz, Hoffman & Hutter, 2015, Swani, Kunnall, Weinberger, & Charles Gulas, 2013). This study is completed by analyzing the effect of incongruity, surprise, emotions, as well as individual variables. With our 5 groups of hypotheses we mainly focus on the impact of culture (Hofstede, 1999; Zhang, 2011; Marieke de Mooij, 2005), and emotions (Rothbart, 1976; Batra & Ray 1986; Burke & Edell 1989) on the effectiveness of humorous advertising (Schwarz, Hoffman & Hutter, 2015; Swani, Kunnall, Weinberger, & Charles Gulas, 2013; Williams & Aaker, 2000). However, we also wanted to verify other moderators from the literature that could affect the humorous advertising persuasion process such as incongruity, surprise (Shrimp, 2010; Meyer et al. 1991), and individual variables (Barriaud, 1985; Solomon, 1988; Goffman 1979; Feingold & Mazzella, 1993; Martin, 2001) (see Annexe 1: Hypothesis).

Our study is based on TV & online Pepsi commercials, exclusively targeting the local tele viewers and online surfers (ex:Youtube, Youku) in each country. The choice of a single brand was made to neutralize the bias of the brand. Pepsi being popular in the three countries and heavily investing in humorous advertising, the brand seemed to be a good choice for our international comparison. Our video selection, from 18 pre-selected Pepsi ads from "Culture Pub" website (French website, displaying worldwide advertising campaigns) to 1 humorous video and 1 neutral video per country was obtained thanks to our pretesting study.

At the stage we proceeded in a qualitative study, interviewing around 20 experts (academicians and practitioners) in each country and in a quantitative study, reaching around 1000 respondents per country. Both studies were introduced in each country in the local language. The analysis of the results obtained confirmed the impact of culture in the process of persuasion of the humorous ads meanwhile showing the possibility of a standardized unique solution. We expect complete our research with an experiment on emotions on the three nations by submitting our 20 candidates per nation to an eye-tracking, oculometry and FACs measurement in 2019.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The objective of this study is to highlight the impact of culture and emotions on advertising efficiency and consumer behavior. From a theoretical point of view, it allows to compare the attitudes of the consumers in France, China and United States towards humorous ads and understand the role of humor in the process of persuasive communication. This cross-cultural study on the effectiveness of humorous ads also underline in which case would it be possible to propose a unique universal humorous solution. But it also shows the role the surprise effect and positive emotions. Empirically, it studies the humor in ads phenomenon on the intention to purchase the product and could allow both advertisers and brands to adapt their strategies. Our study contains few weaknesses however. Our sample of respondents could be larger and involve other sociodemographic criteria to be more representative of the respective populations (limited access to the media of certain populations, demography, age). In addition, we focused our research on the purchase intention of the Pepsi brand. Also, we must recognize that our results would be biased because many elements must be considered in the context of humor in international advertising. Some ideas for further research however emerged from this study regarding the quality of the sample of respondents firstly but also the context of

viewing of the humorous ads (alone or with people) and the neuromarketing measures by observing the conscious and / or unconscious responses of consumers.

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